

Successful Complaint Handling

Despite our best efforts to give a professional service at all times, there will always be a margin of error or simply a breakdown in communication, which inevitably leads to a client complaint or two. Attitude is everything when it comes to dealing with complaints successfully, as Caroline Johnson BSc(Hons) explains.

Handled positively, a complainer can become even more than a bonded client; they can become an ambassador for your practice. Therefore it is essential that attention is paid to this important area and that practices are seen to 'get it right'.

1. Attitude is Everything

A complaint handled well can turn a negative client into an advocate for your practice, so attitude is everything. Take the view that every complaint has the potential of helping the practice give a better level of service – if no-one ever told you what was wrong, how could you ever improve?



2. Help Clients to Complain

Surveys show that each dissatisfied customer will tell about ten others; it is imperative therefore to catch complainers before they leave the practice. Observe body language – encourage those who display negative body language to talk to you about whatever is bothering them. Devise a simple service questionnaire, and encourage clients to give their feedback each time they visit. Be open about your complaint handling procedure by displaying it in the reception area. Most importantly, do all that you can to encourage clients to tell you of their difficulties, not others.

3. Listen, Ask and Summarise

Even if you are sure that you under-

stand the problem, listen until your client has finished explaining; remember that they may have taken time to pluck up the courage to tell you about what they are unhappy about. Furthermore, with an agitated client, simply listening to their problem often helps defuse the situation and calm things down. Ask questions if the situation is not clear. When the client has had their say and you are clear as to what the problem is, then confirm understanding by summarising the key points.

4. Give Thanks

Thank the client for bringing the issue to your attention. This is not an admission of blame, however if you have made a mistake then thank them and apologise immediately; it costs nothing to say 'sorry'.

5. Agree an Action Plan

Tell them what you will do next and how their complaint will be dealt with. If appropriate, refer the matter to a higher authority such as the Practice Manager or Principal. Agree a timeline for when someone will get back to them, and make sure that you stick to it.

6. Find Better Ways of Saying "No"

Sometimes complaints are either unreasonable or impossible to rectify. Rather than use tired old negative excuses such as not enough time, money or staff, find better ways of saying no. Assertive and positive responses include, 'it is the practice policy...' or 'for the sake of the animals we cannot do that...'

